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ABSTRACT

One aspect of a balanced reading program is thinking activities that involve analytic, creative, critical and other higher level behaviors relative to reading selections. The following questions discussed in the paper are meant to be helpful as guidelines for principals in purchasing materials, supervising teachers, and evaluating the effects of the reading program in regards to thinking. (1) Is the content of the reading material well written and relevant to the student? (2) Are teachers asking questions that require higher level thinking? (3) Are teachers providing the thinking time necessary for answering questions above the cognitive level of memory? (4) What kinds of activities are teachers involving students in relative to their reading? (5) Are teachers providing the experiential background necessary for gaining a full understanding of reading selections? (6) Are teachers giving pre-reading instruction that directs students to employ higher level comprehension skills? (7) Are teachers "readers"? (8) Are students reading self-selected materials? (9) Are students reading to satisfy their recreational and informational needs? (Author/WR)

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EVALUATING THE TEACHING OF HIGHER LEVEL COMPREHENSION SKILLS

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(Seminar 9,"Evaluating Reading Instruction--Guidelines for Elementary Principals," Friday, May 12, 1972, 1:30-4:00 p.m. session)

The ultimate objective of reading instruction is to provide students with the skills and attitudes necessary for them to use print to enrich their lives. Reading instruction which falls short of this goal is a failure. Print is a symbol system and Moffett (1968, p. 6) says the following about symbol systems: "Symbol systems are not primarily about themselves; they are about other subjects. When a student 'learns' one of these systems, he 'learns how' to operate it. The main point is to think and talk about other things by means of this system."

Observation of instructional reading programs indicates that the reading experiences some, perhaps many students have in school are more mechanical than meaningful, more productive of correct responses to factual recall questions

and multiple-choice tests than productive of satisfaction from sharing ideas with an author. Short selections from basal readers or kits are read, the accompanying comprehension checks are done immediately and quickly and the selection is promptly forgotten. Students are moved through a progression of short selections and related exercises that often only faintly resemble the communication process that reading should be. However, the selections and exercises do resemble the tasks students are asked to perform on standardized reading achievement tests. Consequently, students may be evaluated as superior readers when in fact they are relatively immature readers in regard to their ability to use reading to solve problems, apply ideas read about in one content area to another, detect an author's bias, evaluate their own biases, see themselves in a literary character, or arrive at a new idea not directly expressed by the author.

Principals and other instructional leaders need to employ some guidelines that go beyond the findings of standardized tests to ascertain whether or not higher level comprehension abilities are being developed as part of the reading program. The content of the materials, the instructional practices of the teachers and the reading related activities of the students must be carefully examined. Reading programs need balance, and one dimension of a balanced reading program is thinking that involves analytic, creative, critical and other higher level cognitive behaviors relative to reading selections. The following questions are meant to be helpful to principals in purchasing materials, supervising teachers and evaluating the effects of the reading program in this regard.

1. Is the content of the reading material well written and relevant to the student with whom it is used?

There is no substitute for good material. Interesting characters, vivid descriptions, unified and coherent paragraphs permit students to empathize,

visualize and think through an idea with an author. The producers of some developmental materials have devised elaborate word attack cues, comprehension questions, work sheets and other instructional aids for material that is poorly written and/or not relevant to the experiences and interests of the students for whom it is intended. Attractive packaging sometimes hides dull, meaningless material that students can do little more with than repeat or answer simple questions about. The development of higher level comprehension skills begins with good narrative or expository writing.

2. Are teachers asking questions that require higher level thinking?

A number of classroom interaction studies have shown a striking avoidance of the kinds of questions that elicit thinking above the memory level. Questions asked before and after reading can direct students to make applications, see relationships and read beyond the lines of print. Sanders' (1966) book, Classroom Questions: What Kinds? has been useful in helping teachers construct questions at the higher cognitive levels.

One indication that a teacher is infrequently asking questions that require higher level thinking are students with their hands raised before the teacher is finishing asking the question. Students who "jump the gun" have apparently learned to expect questions that can be answered without much thinking.

3. Are teachers providing the thinking time necessary for students to answer questions above the cognitive level of memory?

The classroom is a busy place with schedules to be maintained and work to be done. It is not uncommon to observe a teacher ask a thought provoking question, become increasingly uncomfortable as precious seconds are filled with silence, interrupt the thinking going on with more cues to the desired response, and just as students are beginning to put things together in their minds answer the question for them. Teachers have been urged to encourage verbalization and overt activity in their classrooms. But the kind of thinking necessary for

developing higher level comprehension skills often demands quiet reflection which should not be perceived as wasteful.

4. What kinds of activities are teachers involving students in relative to their reading?

Teachers can teach students to look for relationships, evaluate ideas, create new ideas or products and engage in other mature reading behaviors by getting them involved in activities relative to reading selections. A good story might give rise to a simulated author meets the critics interview, a mock trial of the main character or the creation of a new character or bit of dialogue to interject at some point in the story. An account of some historical happening read in a textbook might lead to a debate, writing a newspaper account of the same event, or designing posters advertising for soldiers for the Continental Army. Choral reading of certain poems or writing plays to dramatize a particular period in the life of a great scientist who was discussed in a reading selection are other ways of helping students see the possibilities for stretching their minds while reading. Teachers who cannot or who do not take the time and expend the energy to get students responding to reading in interesting, meaningful activities are missing opportunities to teach higher level comprehension skills.

5. Are teachers providing the experiential background necessary for gaining a full understanding of reading selections?

What a reader takes away from a reading selection depends to a large extent upon what he brings to it. Seeing implications, detecting subtleties, irony, or cynicism in a reading selection all require some experiential commonalities between the author and the reader. A major cause of poor comprehension is that the author and the reader are playing in different ballparks. As Professor Harold Hill proved in The Music Man, "You gotta know the territory."

6. Are teachers giving pre-reading instruction that directs students to employ higher level comprehension skills while reading?

Students will read for the purposes that are set for them. If they are told to watch for propaganda techniques or implications for changing their life styles before they read, they will read for those purposes. No successful coach sends his team on to the field of play without a game plan. Yet many teachers wait until after the reading has been done to let students know what great opportunities the selection held for mature thinking experiences.

7. Are the teachers "readers" in the best sense of the word?

Wendell Johnson (1956, p. 123) says, "Reading is something we do, not so much with our eyes, as such, as with our knowledge and interests and enthusiasm, our hatred and fondnesses and fears, our evaluations in all their forms and aspects. Because this is so, a fondness for reading is something that a child acquires in much the same way as he catches a cold--by being effectively exposed to someone who already has it." Teachers who are themselves infrequent or superficial readers may pass their limited concept of reading on to their students. Gans (1967) says, "When I go into a group, I realize first of all that I carry something in. I reflect what I think reading means." Principals who want their students to develop and use higher level comprehension skills should hire teachers who have developed and who use higher level comprehension skills. One aspect of a good interview or conference would be to ask prospective or practicing teachers to discuss something they are currently reading or have read recently.

8. Are students given opportunities to read some self-selected material and converse with other students about it?

Higher level comprehension skills are more likely to be employed when students are reading material that interests them. Free reading time should be allocated at all grade levels as a major dimension of the school reading

program. Unless school time is provided, the students who need reading practice most will get the least. Practice reading is essential for interpretative, critical, creative and other higher level thinking behaviors to become an integral part of a student's reading performance. Opportunities to converse about reading experiences with other students in small groups without a lot of structure or focus is also important. During these informal discussions students learn what other students get from their reading and by verbalizing their own reactions to a reading selection become more keenly aware of the mental processes one employs while reading. One student remarked, "It's when I talk about it that I really understand it."

9. Are students using reading to satisfy their informational and recreational needs?

Students who are not learning to use higher level comprehension skills are likely to find severe limitations in the power of reading to satisfy their personal needs. Students who cannot comprehend beyond the level of literal interpretation will probably turn to sources other than reading to solve their problems. Signs of a well balanced reading program include students reading books, magazines and newspapers, students asking for books, students using the library and students talking about what they are reading. Students who like reading (meaning reading instruction) but who don't read are indications of a reading program going nowhere.

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